EFFECTS OF CONTEXTUAL SIGNALS ON PRESENTEEISM AND EXHAUSTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Attending work while ill, called presenteeism, has important implications for organizations due to its relationship with reduced productivity. Workers who engage in this behavior also have negative health outcomes and may have increased absenteeism in the future. Organizations may benefit from better understanding what conditions influence presenteeism. To further our understanding of presenteeism, I propose a model based on conservation of resources theory and social learning theory in which feedback awareness is positively related to emotional exhaustion both directly and indirectly through presenteeism. I argued that those who pay more attention to signals in their environment regarding performance expectations are more likely to attend work while ill, which will result in greater resource loss and subsequently more emotional exhaustion. I also argued conscientiousness moderates these relationships, such that high conscientiousness individuals will engage in more presenteeism and experience more emotional exhaustion when they perform feedback awareness behaviors, due to their need for achievement. Results suggested that feedback monitoring is positively related to emotional exhaustion directly and indirectly through presenteeism. Results also suggested conscientious is important to the direct relationship between feedback monitoring and emotional exhaustion, however in the opposite direction of what was proposed, suggesting conscientiousness may be a buffer against resource loss related to feedback awareness. The findings emphasize the importance of cues that organizations send to their workers in regard to presenteeism, and that feedback awareness may have some drawbacks for individuals in the form of emotional depletion.

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CHAPTER I

The workplace has been in a state of flux due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For the duration of this pandemic, organizational leaders have had to make decisions regarding the physical presence of workers and customers. For example, they have had to determine whether workers who may have symptoms should be present at work or stay home. They might be short-staffed if workers stay away. The outbreak that could occur if they are present could be far more catastrophic, both in terms of available workers and negative public relations. Additionally, there are ethical concerns regarding putting workers at risk of catching a potentially lethal virus. These issues are relevant to the study of presenteeism, which is to be physically present at work while feeling unwell (Simpson, 2019).

Whereas the current pandemic situation may be an outlier compared to typical previous working conditions, presenteeism is an issue even in normal circumstances. Indeed, it was emerging as a substantial issue well before the pandemic (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2019). Organizations may benefit from evaluating their policies and culture regarding the practice of presenteeism. Best practices may be even more ambiguous in normal times when there is not a salient, collective heath concern.

Prior to the current pandemic, medical professionals emphasized the need for workers in the field of healthcare to stay home when ill due to the possibility of causing an outbreak among workers as well as patients (Widera, Chang, & Chen, 2010). Currently, that concern is exacerbated by Covid-19 pandemic, with outbreaks at hospitals being potentially life-threatening to workers and patients (Abbas et al., 2021). Aside from getting other workers sick, presenteeism can lead to other negative outcomes for both employees and organizations, such as burnout and reduced productivity (Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009; Johns, 2011).

Indeed, presenteeism threatens employee's psychological and physical health, as well as the health of the organization.

Employees attending work while ill may reduce the ire directed at them from their superiors. Doing so might also increase the perception that they are committed to their work and their organization. However, it can also lead to negative psychological outcomes. Presenteeism implies that workers have a reasonable cause for remaining at home, but instead they choose to go to work (Hemp, 2004). The assumption here is that from a health perspective, physical or otherwise, it might be better for workers to stay home. One potential tradeoff is in the form of psychological resources. Employees who work while ill are potentially both using up a higher rate of their resources doing their normal work and preventing the opportunity to regain energy that they would have received by staying home (Hobfoll, 1989). Engaging in this on an ongoing basis could lead to prolonged state of depletion—emotional exhaustion (Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, Schaufeli, & Schwab, 1986).

One way in which workers may make decisions regarding presenteeism could be due to signals they receive in their work environment. Some workers may engage in feedback awareness, which is to seek feedback in the form of signals from supervisors and coworkers regarding what behaviors are rewarded and encouraged (Ashford, 1983). To illustrate, workers might notice that the boss's favorite employee never calls in sick, or that their boss complains whenever a coworker has to take a sick day. Workers engaging in feedback awareness would recognize these situations and thus gain information regarding how presenteeism is perceived and rewarded in their workplace.

However, there are obvious costs to having workers remain home when ill, as it can be difficult to replace their output when they are away. Additionally, many workers may not be

inclined to stay home. Personality variables and aspects of their life situation may be more salient than their physiological state. Personality factors can influence the likelihood that a person will engage in presenteeism (Johns, 2011; Kono, Uji, & Matsushima, 2015; Yang, Zhu, & Xie, 2015). For example, Johns (2011) found that emotional stability was positively related to presenteeism, as well as work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. Some workers may prefer to go to the office, even when sick, in order to avoid problems at home.

Workers may be more or less likely to come to work when ill based on information received from feedback awareness, depending on their personality. High-conscientiousness individuals have a higher need for achievement and may be more likely to attend work while ill if they believe they will be rewarded for doing so or punished for not (Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). They may also expend more resources due to their desire to achieve their normal level of performance while ill, as diminished performance may negatively impact their future prospects, leading to more stress in the long run.

In summary, the pandemic has shined light on the issue of presenteeism. There are at least two key aspects. One is the need by organizations to have personnel present at critical times. The second involves decisions by employees to come to work ill. I focused on the latter. I seek to inform theory with regard to how situational cues influence presenteeism decisions and how those decisions impact the employees. Applying Conservation of Resources and Social Learning theories (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Hobfoll, 1989) as a foundation, I propose a model in which presenteeism is a mediator between feedback awareness and emotional exhaustion. Workers who engage in higher amounts of feedback awareness likely experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion, both directly and indirectly through presenteeism. It is likely that individual differences affect this process; that is, personality probably plays a role in determining

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the impact of situational cues and norms on presenteeism decisions. Accordingly, I also propose that conscientiousness moderates these relationships, such that they are stronger among workers high in conscientiousness compared to those low in conscientiousness.

Presenteeism

Researchers have focused on absenteeism, which is to be absent from work, for a relatively long period of time and have produced a substantial body of literature on the subject (e.g., Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Porter & Steers, 1973; Muchinsky, 1977). While obviously an important topic, given both the amount of studies and clear implications for organizational productivity, perhaps of similar importance is the topic of presenteeism.

Scholars have yet to reach a consensus on a definition of presenteeism. Descriptions have ranged from very broad to specific. Some have included reduced performance as part of the construct. Johns (2010) pointed out this as being problematic due to its inclusion of both outcome and predictor. Different individuals are likely to respond differently to the same ailments, meaning that performance is likely to differ in its relationship to presenteeism across workers. Some might increase output when they do not feel well as a way of maintaining their usual level of work, whereas others may conserve their energy in order to recover. Additionally, there is the element of time that must be considered. Performance may drop while one is engaged in presenteeism, but it might also drop in the long term due to the lack of recuperation associated with presenteeism. This can result in strain (McEwen, 1998; Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005). Conflating a drop in performance as a result of presenteeism with the act itself reduces researchers' ability to fully understand the boundary conditions of the behavior and creates a messy conceptualization. Due to these considerations, I employ Johns' (2010, p. 521) definition, "attending work while ill." This focuses solely on the behavior of interest and not possible

outcomes. Presenteeism may be thought of as the opposite of absenteeism. However, it is a bit narrower in focus due to only including "illness," whereas absenteeism can include a variety of behaviors unrelated to one's health.

Despite its specificity in comparison to absenteeism, presenteeism is broad in its scope. Presenteeism is associated with a variety of health conditions, such as allergies and diabetes, which are related to lower productivity (Schultz & Edington, 2007). While perhaps not considered by some to be a valid reason to be absent, depression is also related to limitations to one's productivity and is a precursor to presenteeism (Burton, Pransky, Conti, Chen, & Edington, 2004). These various health issues have different relationships with absenteeism and presenteeism. For example, Gosselin, Lemyre, and Corneil (2013) found that emotional and blood pressure issues were more predictive of absenteeism, whereas gastritis and allergies were more likely to predict presenteeism. These differences may be due to cultural perceptions around the health issue itself, as well as the sufferer's perception of how difficult it is to work while experiencing the issue. Despite not being a prominent reason for workers to stay home, allergies can cost organizations in the form of lost productivity (Hemp, 2004). Diary survey data reveal that productivity loss is more prevalent as a result of presenteeism when paired with emotional exhaustion and negative affect (Ferreira et al., 2019). This illustrates how presenteeism can result in reduced performance through both physical and psychological processes.

Presenteeism can also lead to future absenteeism, meaning that there may be more productivity lost in the long run due to working while ill rather than being absent initially (Bergström, Bodin, Hagberg, Aronsson, & Josephson, 2009). From a holistic perspective, it is possible that the short-term gains an organizational or work unit might achieve with presenteeism, namely worker output, might have unintended consequences that counteract the

short-term benefits. This also brings up the ethics of pressuring workers, whether implicitly or explicitly, to work while ill, as it can lead to further health issues for workers and potentially lead to lasting physical and psychological harm. That presenteeism is problematic for both productivity and worker well-being has warranted its empirical attention.

In terms of predicting presenteeism, health issues comprise one factor that is fairly straightforward. When individuals do not feel unwell, physically or otherwise, they cannot engage in presenteeism under the prior definition (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005). Additional predictors include staffing issues, such as being difficult to replace, as well as lack of resources and personal finance difficulties (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005). Both factors within one's work situation. One's life outside it influences whether a person will attend work while ill or will stay home. In a broader perspective of presenteeism, Johns (2010) provided a model in which a health event predicts either presenteeism or absenteeism based on the event itself, person-related factors, such as personality and work attitudes, and context-related factors, such as absence policy and job security. These health events can be acute, episodic, or chronic, which illustrates how wide the variety of possible causes of presenteeism are. Another crucial point that Johns (2010) made is that instances of presenteeism or absenteeism can influence future choices regarding these behaviors. If workers choose to stay home when they have a common cold but then feel ill again the following week, they may be less likely to stay home during second illness so that they do not appear slothful.

The presence of an illness is not the only relevant factor in a worker's decision-making. Managers concerned with this issue are likely to benefit from revisiting their staffing and compensation policies. Taking care of employees in this manner may also indirectly help reduce presenteeism by reducing strain through increased resources, which can help improve health

outcomes for workers (De Jonge & Dormann, 2006; Lerner, Levine, Malspeis, & D'Agostino, 1994). Another way to target presenteeism is to target the workplace culture around presenteeism (Dew, Keefe, & Small, 2005). This could influence employees to attend work even though they are ill due to their perception that it is looked upon favorably to do so, which they may ascertain through feedback awareness.

Feedback Awareness

Early research on feedback focused on a passive form of feedback, such as a supervisor giving advice or course corrections to a subordinate (Ashford, 1986). The idea was that feedback is a formal or informal event that happens to employees on a regular or irregular basis. However, Ashford and Cummings (1983) suggested that in addition to this, workers themselves can seek feedback, and that they do so through two methods—feedback inquiry and feedback monitoring, which I will refer to as feedback awareness. Feedback inquiry involves approaching peers and supervisors to get feedback. In contrast, feedback awareness involves noting cues regarding what behaviors are rewarded or punished and comparing one's performance to peers' performance (Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). Parker and Collins (2010) argued that feedback seeking was a form of proactive person-environment fit behaviors. Workers engage in these behaviors to understand and improve their standing in the organization, essentially improving their fit in the workplace. As such, it is often conceptualized as part of the socialization process for new employees, due to the lack of information one has when joining an organization and their desire to meet standards and expectations so they can be accepted (Bauer & Green, 1994; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006). Additionally, feedback seeking behaviors are employed when individuals feel as though they are not meeting their goals (Ashford, 1986). Workers may feel dissonance between their performance and how they think their performance should be. Through

feedback awareness workers can determine whether this dissonance is warranted or if they need to improve their performance, dependent on the signals they receive.

VandeWalle et al. (2000) presented a model in which feedback seeking behaviors are predicted by the perceived costs and benefits of doing so, which are informed by leader initiating structure and consideration, as well as the individual's level of learning goal orientation. Feedback seeking is also predicted by personality traits, such as extraversion and openness to experience (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000).

With this study, I am focusing on feedback awareness. A process reflecting social learning, it is likely to be more relevant to presenteeism than feedback seeking. What supervisors might say they value could be quite different from what behaviors they actually reward. Indeed, it may not be politically wise for a manager to say out loud that they expect their subordinates to appear at work even when they are ill, but instead they can subtly reward those that do so, or make those that do take time off when unwell feel uncomfortable for doing so. As such, feedback awareness may be more useful in predicting behaviors such as presenteeism, where there might be conflicting information present in the workplace. Feedback inquiring employees may receive messages that are more favorable toward staying home when sick but may not accurately reflect the feelings of their direct superiors.

Work on the construct of feedback awareness has been based on social learning theory, which is helpful in describing how workers look to other sources for how to act in the workplace (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Social Learning theory posits that one way in which people learn is by observing the behaviors of others. Specifically, they view the consequences of others' actions and whether they are positive or negative. Observing positive consequences, also called reinforcements, increases the likelihood that a person will seek to emulate that behavior if they

want similar outcomes. Simply put, they observe what behaviors are rewarded and which ones are discouraged and then compare their own behavior to others. To apply this to feedback awareness, workers may observe what course of action their coworker takes when they do not feel well, namely whether they still are present for work or not. If their chosen action is followed by reward, then the observing party is likely to imitate that behavior the next time they are ill. If that action is punished instead, then the observing party is more likely to choose the opposing action (staying home instead of presenteeism, or vice-versa).

Hess (2019) reported that a study by Accountemps, a global staffing firm, indicated that 90% of employees admit they have gone to work when ill. Of those, 33% indicated that they always report to work when sick. Additionally, employees are more likely to engage in presenteeism than absenteeism (Gosselin et al., 2013). These numbers and research suggest that orally-communicated comments by supervisors and peers involving the theme of being at work predominantly reinforce the expectation to be at work—whether implicitly or explicitly—and not the preference for remaining at home to recover. Indeed, Dietz et al. (2020) found that leader presenteeism predicted employee presenteeism. This reinforces the idea that workers can identify expected behavior by watching others, such as their supervisor, and then replicate that behavior. Hence, I suggest that individuals who are paying attention to cues from their supervisor and peers are likely to report to work when ill when those supervisor and peers are manifesting behaviors reflecting advocacy of presenteeism. Of course, individuals who are paying attention to cues from their supervisor and peers may be unlikely to report to work when ill when those supervisor and peers are manifesting behaviors that discourage presenteeism. However, employees who engage in high levels of feedback awareness—a form of situational awareness—

are likely to want to be at work as often as possible so that they can be positioned to observe what is happening. Hence, they are likely to come to work even when ill. Accordingly, I propose:

Hypothesis 1. Feedback awareness is positively related to presenteeism.

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion describes a state of emotional and physical depletion experienced by workers, often as a result of high job demands and low personal resources (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). That is, it is a form of strain resulting from workplace stressors (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Zinta, 2003). It was originally considered as a component of burnout but is now typically considered on its own. Cropanzano et al, (2003) explained this occurrence as being due to emotional exhaustion having a stronger relationship with other variables than the other components and also due to it capturing the central meaning of burnout. The other components of burnout include depersonalization and diminished personal achievement. Depersonalization describes a detached feeling from one's coworkers and organization, while diminishing personal achievement describes feeling as though one's performance and accomplishments do not matter and a negative view toward oneself (Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, Schaufeli, & Schwab, 1986).

Emotional exhaustion results in lower performance and negative health outcomes (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). It also impacts jobs attitudes, reducing organizational citizenship and increasing turnover intentions (Cropanzano et al., 2003). Emotionally exhausted workers are not only going through a difficult time as a result of workplace factors. They are also not giving the full output of which they are capable and at risk of leaving the organization. As such, organizations may benefit from doing their part in preventing emotional exhaustion in their workers, even aside from humanitarian reasons for doing so. Considering the multiple domains

of life and work that it can impact, it is clear why emotional exhaustion receives the high level of attention that it does.

Scholars have also described emotional exhaustion as reflecting low energy and a sense of being bereft of emotional resources (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Relatedly, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory helps explain emotional exhaustion and the processes that lead to it (Hobfoll, 1989). According to the theory, a resource is anything that has inherent value to a person or is useful as a means for attaining other resources, such as time and energy. When people lose resources or anticipate losing resources, they experience stress, whereas attaining resources can alleviate stress (Hobfoll, 2011). Because anticipation is part of the equation, a similar event may cause differing levels of stress across individuals, as different individuals may perceive the event's implications for their resources as being more or less severe. While short-term resource loss can cause stress, an ongoing loss of resources causes strain and, eventually, emotional exhaustion (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). It also has a long history of being included separate from other components of burnout in a variety of organizational contexts (Karatepe & Aleshinloye, 2009; Klusmann et al., 2008; Lewin & Sager, 2009; Stordeur, D'hoore, & Vandenberghe, 2001; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

COR theory also helps explain how workers and organizations can prevent emotional exhaustion. Namely, that resources can help reduce stress. Following this assertion, research indicates that resources can be a buffer against emotional exhaustion. Coping strategies, such as asking for advice or assistance, are one way that workers can inhibit emotional exhaustion (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). Practicing mindfulness is another coping strategy that is effective in preventing emotional exhaustion (Hülsheger, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013). These are

ultimately individual behaviors that provide a buffer against strain. However, there are also contextual factors that can be helpful. Organizational justice, specifically interpersonal and distributive justice perceptions, is negatively related to emotional exhaustion (Cole, Bernerth, Walter, & Holt, 2010). If workers feel their organization treats them fairly, they have greater protection against such psychological depletion. Additionally, support from one's supervisor also acts as a buffer against emotional exhaustion (Thompson, Kirk, & Brown, 2005). In academia, a students' support from their advisor provides a similar resource in preventing emotional strain (Rigg, Day, & Adler, 2013).

Because presenteeism implies expending energy when a person may be better off conserving it, those who engage in presenteeism are likely to lose personal resources in the process, due to prolonging their current health issue and attempting to perform under suboptimal personal conditions. Additionally, surface and deep-level acting predict emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2003; Martínez-Iñigo, Totterdell, Alcover, & Holman, 2007). Individuals who are working while sick are likely to perform some level of acting in order to not appear unwell, so that others do not think they should have stayed home. Similarly, display rules, where some emotions are encouraged to be expressed on the job and others are prohibited, can be a precursor to emotional exhaustion (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). As such, I propose:

Hypothesis 2. Presenteeism is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Workers engaging in feedback awareness compare their own output to those around them. Placing a high level of focus on one's standing in the workplace is likely to be a drain on resources, as it can increase awareness of negative feedback and take focus away from the more positive aspects of one's work. Time spent processing negative information at work is likely to dampen one's mood, and subsequently one's ongoing emotional state if it is sustained.

Additionally, it can cause an individual to worry about signals they receive that a low-feedback monitor would not have perceived, regardless of whether those signals are real or not. This worry then increases stress and strain. Of course, not all individuals receive negative feedback. High levels of feedback awareness is likely to affect all workers—whether they receive positive or negative feedback—in that hypervigilant situational awareness (i.e., feedback awareness) requires considerable personal resources. Hence, I propose:

Hypothesis 3. Feedback awareness is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

The effects of feedback awareness on emotional exhaustion may be direct, indirect, or both. Feedback awareness may increase one's emotional exhaustion through the aforementioned direct processes, such as perceiving negative signals and experiencing more stress as a result. It may also influence it by increasing the likelihood one attends work sick, which could impact emotional exhaustion due to resource drain and lack of recuperation. It likely influences emotional exhaustion through both paths because the cues from one's work that affect presenteeism are likely to coincide with the resource drain that one gets from exerting effort to manifest feedback awareness. Thus, I propose:

Hypothesis 4. The effect of feedback awareness on emotional exhaustion is both

direct and indirect through presenteeism.

Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness is a personality trait that describes organized, detail-oriented, and hardworking persons at the high-end, and unfocused, distracted, and slothful persons at the low end (Costa Jr & McCrae, 1992). A dimension of the Big 5 Model of Personality, it is the best personality-based, individual differences predictor of overall job performance across jobs and industries (Barrick & Mount, 1991). The Big 5 Model of Personality also includes extraversion,

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openness to experience, agreeableness, and emotional stability, also known as neuroticism when reverse-coded. The dimensions of the Big 5 are related to various workplace behaviors, such as counterproductive work behaviors and turnovers (Salgado, 2002). These traits are stable over relatively long periods of time, providing usefulness in predicting outcomes for both research and organizational purposes (Cobb-Clark & Schurer, 2012).

One reason that researchers have focused on conscientious is due to its relevance to the workplace. As mentioned, it is conceptualized as a measure for one's tendency to work hard and focus on tasks. An organization is unlikely to want to hire individuals disinclined toward hard work. Indeed, conscientiousness predicts success in the workplace in the form of performance, as well as in other areas of life such as academics and life satisfaction (Duckworth, Weir, Tsukayama, & Kwok, 2012; Gellatly, 1996; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007).

However, high levels of conscientiousness can have its drawbacks. Cianci, Klein, and Seijts (2010) found that individuals high in conscientiousness experienced higher levels of tension after being given negative feedback following a performance goal, and subsequently performed worse on a follow-up task than low conscientiousness individuals. Indeed, high-conscientiousness individuals are concerned about achievement as well as norms (Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). By engaging in feedback awareness, a person compares themselves and their behavior to others and attempts to discern how they are perceived. For workers high in conscientiousness, this is likely to lead to extra effort expended toward following workplace norms and increasing effort whenever they perceive that they are not performing well enough or that they are not following said norms closely enough. Low-conscientiousness workers are less likely to expend as many resources on course correction as

high-conscientiousness workers. Additionally, due to their concern for achievement, high-conscientiousness workers are likely to experience greater distress when they receive unfavorable feedback, due to its negative implications for achievement. By having additional concerns and cognitive load on top of their usual effort, as well as greater distress from unfavorable feedback reflecting failure, they are likely to experience more emotional exhaustion as a result of feedback awareness.

However, the opposite may be true, because conscientiousness could also be a resource itself, as it is associated with work ethic and effort. High-conscientious workers who receive negative feedback may better equipped to translate said feedback into better performance due to already being inclined toward hard work and detail, whereas low-conscientiousness workers may experience a larger drain on resources when incorporating feedback, due to having fewer capabilities for changing their focus and behavior. Nevertheless, along with the prior argument, I propose:

Hypothesis 5. The direct effect of feedback awareness on emotional exhaustion is moderated by conscientiousness; the positive relationship is stronger among individuals approaching the higher (vs. lower) end of conscientiousness.

Because individuals higher in conscientiousness are more preoccupied with observing workplace norms, they will be more likely to act on feedback they receive regarding presenteeism and absenteeism, which may often result working when feeling unwell. The potential costs of exhibiting discouraged behavior, in this case, absenteeism, is likely to increase their likelihood of attending work despite sickness. Those lower in conscientiousness may receive information regarding presenteeism but will be less inclined to follow it due to lower self-control and less concern for outcomes related to achievement. Additionally, if there is

ambiguous or mixed feedback regarding presenteeism, high-conscientiousness workers are likely to err on the side of caution and minimize risk toward their career, thus attending work even if they feel unwell. However, high-conscientiousness workers may also have a high level of conscientiousness when it comes to their health. Specifically, they may pay more attention than others and work hard to maintain a high level of health by resting when needed. Nevertheless, using the prior reasoning, I propose:

Hypothesis 6. Conscientiousness moderates the relationship between feedback awareness and presenteeism; the positive relationship is stronger among individuals approaching the higher (vs. lower) end of conscientiousness.

High-conscientiousness workers are more concerned about their output and performance. When they come to work sick, they are more likely to expend more effort to maintain their typical level of performance despite their condition. This is likely to drain their energy and lead to negative health and psychological outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion. Low-conscientiousness workers may be more likely to conserve energy if they are sick at work, thus buffering somewhat against the effects of emotional exhaustion.

However, conscientiousness could once again be a buffer against emotional exhaustion, as working while sick might be less taxing for high-conscientious workers who have a stronger work ethic. Such individuals are used to working hard, and perhaps even expend less energy to do so, allowing them to be work while ill with diminished negative repercussions. Additionally, some research indicates that working harder is a coping strategy linked to reduced emotional exhaustion, which could apply in this situation (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). This could drain one's resources more quickly when sick, or help one get through it. Nevertheless, along with the prior argument, I propose:

Hypothesis 7. Conscientiousness moderates the relationship between presenteeism and emotional exhaustion; the positive relationship is stronger among individuals approaching the higher (vs. lower) end of conscientiousness.

Control Variables

I plan to employ the Big 5 personality dimensions of emotional stability and extraversion as controls. Extraversion describes a person's tendency to be outgoing, talkative and socially dominant, whereas emotional stability describes the one's tendency to not feel anxiety, insecurity, or other negative emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1980). Similar to conscientiousness, both traits are relevant linked to performance, albeit to a lesser extent (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). Emotional stability and extroversion are also related to outcomes involving wellbeing, such as emotional exhaustion (Bakker, Van Der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Friedman, Kern, & Reynolds, 2010). Hence, I included emotional stability and extroversion as controls. However, because emotional stability is likely closely linked with emotional exhaustion, I will run separate analyses excluding emotional stability as a control variable to check the robustness of the predicted relationships.

CHAPTER II

Methods

Sample

The study sample consists of 174 of 246 (71%) city government employees. The employees work in manual labor and generally in the field as opposed to an office setting. They voluntarily completed surveys during working hours as part of a larger, 360-degree feedback study project. Demographic data were not collected because of the nature of the study—360-degree feedback.

Measures

 Feedback awareness. I measured feedback awareness using four items based on the

Ashford (1986) feedback monitoring scale. Example items include "I frequently observe what

performance behaviors my boss rewards and use this as feedback" and "I frequently pay

attention to how my boss acts toward me and use this as feedback." Respondents were asked to

what extent they agree with the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5

= "strongly agree").

 Presenteeism. I measured presenteeism using a question based on Aronsson, Gustafsson,

and Dallner's (2000) 1-item presenteeism scale—"How many times during the last 12 months

have you gone to work even though it would have been reasonable to take sick leave?" The scale

ranged from a 1 ("No, never") to a 5 ("Yes, more than 8 times"). The single item scale is typical

for presenteeism research (Aronsson et al., 2000; Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005, Gosselin et al.,

2013). Demerouti et al. (2009) found that a single-item presenteeism scale can be reliable over a

12-month period.

 Emotional Exhaustion. I measured emotional exhaustion using 5 items from the

Maslach burnout inventory's (Maslach et al., 1986) emotional exhaustion sub-scale, which

includes "I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job," and

"I feel used up at the end of the workday." Respondents were asked to what extent they agree

with the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree").

 Personality. I employed 8 items from Saucier's (1994) Big-Five mini-markers for each

of the three personality scales—conscientiousness (e.g., "organized" and "inefficient"),

emotional stability (e.g., "temperamental" and "relaxed"), and extroversion (e.g., "talkative" and

"withdrawn"). Each item was assessed using a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = "extremely

inaccurate" to 9 = "extremely accurate").

CHAPTER III

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of the study variables.

Presenteeism was related to feedback awareness ($r = .25$, $p < .01$) and emotional exhaustion ($r =$

$.35$, $p < .001$), consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2. Feedback awareness was related to emotional

exhaustion ($r = .22$, $p < .01$), consistent with Hypothesis 3.

I applied the Hayes (2013) Process Macro to test my hypothesized model. Feedback

awareness was related to presenteeism ($b = .39$, $p < .01$) and emotional exhaustion ($b = .18$, $p <$

$.05$), which is consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 3, respectively. Presenteeism was related to

emotional exhaustion ($b = .22$, $p < .001$). The 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect did

not include zero (.03, .16); however, the 95% confidence intervals for the direct effect did

include zero (-.00, .31), providing mixed support for Hypothesis 4.

The Process Macro (Hayes, 2013) also allows for the testing of moderated mediation. I

found that conscientiousness moderated the relationship between feedback awareness and

emotional exhaustion ($b = -.11$, $p < .05$). However, it was in the opposite direction of Hypothesis

5, thus not supporting it. Instead of making the relationship stronger for those high in

conscientiousness, it was stronger for those low in conscientiousness. Conscientiousness did not

moderate the relationships between feedback awareness and presenteeism ($b = .06$, $p < .41$), and

presenteeism and emotional exhaustion ($b = .00$, *ns*)—inconsistent with Hypotheses 6 and 7.

I also tested the model excluding emotional stability as a control variable, which is

presented in Figure 4. Table 3 shows the model's regression coefficients. The model had minute

differences among a few relationships, but each relationship that was significant in the initial

model remained significant in this model and in the same direction. I tested a model excluding

emotional stability due to it potentially removing meaningful variance in the model through its

relationship with emotional exhaustion (Bakker et al., 2006). The regression coefficients were

minimally different compared to the initial model. For example, the relationship between

presenteeism and emotional exhaustion was slightly weaker in the initial model ($b = .22$, $p < .01$)

than the model excluding emotion stability as a control ($b = .23$, $p < .01$). However, the

mediation model received more support when emotional support was excluded, because the 95%

confidence intervals for the direct effect did include zero (.03, .34). Due to the greater support for

Hypothesis 4, I did not include emotional stability as a control variable in the final model.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of scores for the presenteeism item responses. As shown

there, a majority of the respondents had manifested some presenteeism over a twelve-month

period. The mean was 2.64 on a scale from 1 to 5, with a standard deviation of 1.27. A response

of 2 reflected two instances of presenteeism in the last twelve months. A response of 3, which

was the modal response, reflected two to five instances of presenteeism in the last twelve

months. This suggests that, on average, a worker in this sample attended work when they could

have taken sick leave somewhere between 1 and 5 days in the 12 months prior to when the data

were collected.

CHAPTER IV

Discussion

I proposed a model in which feedback awareness is positively related to emotional

exhaustion both directly and indirectly through presenteeism. I also proposed conscientiousness

as a moderator for each relationship in the model, such that each would be stronger among high

conscientious workers versus low conscientious workers. The mediation model I proposed was partially supported. Feedback awareness was positively related to both presenteeism and emotional exhaustion, and presenteeism was positively related to emotional exhaustion. Conscientiousness only moderated the relationship between feedback awareness and emotional exhaustion, albeit in the opposite direction of what was proposed, such that high conscientiousness workers had a weaker relationship between feedback awareness and emotional exhaustion compared to low conscientiousness workers.

These findings suggest that individuals who engage in feedback awareness are likely to experience higher levels of presenteeism and emotional exhaustion. To illustrate, workers who are evaluating their performance compared to others and making note of what behaviors are rewarded by their supervisor are more likely to attend work while ill and experience diminished resources as a result of this. Thus, they develop emotional exhaustion. Additionally, the act of feedback awareness increases worker stress and thus increases emotional exhaustion.

This study contributes to theory surrounding the study variables by providing support for feedback awareness, and thus social learning theory, as a process relevant to presenteeism. Worker who pay attention to signals in their workplace are more likely to attend work while ill. One possible explanation for this may be due to them receiving signals that such behavior is viewed favorably by their supervisor, such that the workers engage in presenteeism in order to receive positive outcomes. However, because I did not measure what behaviors are being promoted in the workplace, it cannot be ascertained why feedback awareness is related to presenteeism. It is possible instead that feedback awareness is related to other underlying conditions that cause individuals to be present for work when they have reason to remain home. For example, those who engage in feedback awareness may do so as a way of reducing

uncertainty. If workers re not present for work, they cannot engage in such behaviors. Thus, they miss out on opportunities to reduce uncertainty and buffer against anxiety they might feel towards their standing in the organization. Similarly, it is possible that such workers might be more concerned than others with how they are perceived and believe that it is more likely that they will be perceived negatively for not being present for work than to be ill at work. Again, due to the missing information, specific underlying processes cannot be determined. Future research could remedy this by measuring workplace presenteeism climate, supervisor comments regarding presenteeism, or other variables that might help clarify this relationship and determine the underlying psychological process.

This study also contributes to the feedback awareness literature by incorporating COR theory. Feedback awareness was positively related to emotional exhaustion. I proposed this is due to feedback awareness taking resources in the form of attention and energy and shifts one's focus from positive aspects of the workplace to more negative ones, which could be a drain on resources. Indeed, research indicates that emotional exhaustion is related to resource loss (Cropanzano, 1998). However, more research would be necessary to determine both causality and underlying processes. Additionally, this study provides support for a potential drawback to feedback awareness, as it could potentially deplete a person's resources. Since feedback awareness is conceptualized as part of environment fit and onboarding processes, this could help provide additional perspective on how those processes could contribute to emotional strain for new employees, and thus ways to provides buffers against said strain (Bauer & Green, 1994; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006).

Another contribution is that conscientious could be a potential buffer for the relationship between feedback awareness and emotional exhaustion. Research indicates that

conscientiousness can act as a buffer in the workplace against various stressors, and the results

suggest conscientiousness may have a similar relationship with feedback awareness (Abbas &

Raja, 2019; Nandkeolyar, Shaffer, Li, Ekkirala, & Bagger, 2014). It is possible that the act of

feedback awareness is not as resource-intensive for high conscientiousness workers. Because

conscientiousness is related to being detail-oriented, a focus on details in one's workplace

dynamics for the purpose of gauging one's performance in relation to others might not require as

much mental and emotional bandwidth (Costa Jr & McCrae, 1992). Another possible explanation

is that conscientiousness is associated with higher performance. Thus, the feedback that high-

conscientiousness workers receive from their supervisor and coworkers is generally more

positive. Receiving positive information regarding one's performance would suggest one's

resources are not at risk, but rather secure and potentially in the process of increasing, and thus

reduce the likelihood of emotional exhaustion (Eastburg, Williamson, Gorsuch, & Ridley, 1994).

However, because this moderating effect was proposed to be in the opposite direction, it could

also be an artifact of the data, such that conscientiousness does not moderate the relationship.

Future research should clarify this aspect of the model through replication.

The findings of this study suggest the possibility that presenteeism may be a result of

implied processes. Organizations may benefit from evaluating their rewards systems and implicit

aspects of their culture. Even if there is an organization-wide policy or expressed discouragement

of presenteeism, if individuals are punished for staying home or rewarded for disregarding the

organization's suggestions, then presenteeism, and thus emotional exhaustion, may prevail.

Therefore, if an organization is concerned with presenteeism or emotional exhaustion of workers,

they may want to find ways to discourage presenteeism, either punitively or through rewarding

the opposite behavior, if possible. Additionally, they may want to train supervisors to avoid

rewarding presenteeism and actively support their subordinates who remain home when ill, both explicitly and implicitly. While it is unclear whether feedback awareness itself can be or should be discouraged, the aforementioned suggestions may help buffer against its hypothesized relationship with presenteeism.

As mentioned, since the underlying process could not be determined in this model, it is possible that other explanations for the significant relationships may be more accurate, such as employees attending work while ill as a way of reducing uncertainty. In this case, it may be beneficial for organizations to provide ongoing feedback through supervisors as a way to reduce uncertainty. This could help in two ways. First, it could reduce the likelihood that feedback awareness employees would attend work while ill. Second, it could help them reduce their feedback awareness behaviors as an ongoing process, which could subsequently prevent emotional exhaustion.

Due to the potential negative effects of feedback awareness, it may benefit organizations to identify ways to reduce individuals' needs for such behaviors or provide buffers against its effects. As previously discussed, providing ongoing feedback may help. Another avenue may be to eliminate or prevent a culture of competitiveness (Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008). If employees feel as though they are directly competing with their coworkers for rewards in the organization, they are likely to increase the extent to which they compare themselves to others and focus on cues from their supervisors. While this could lead to increased performance, it could also lead to emotional exhaustion, as suggested by the findings.

This study also adds to the literature by providing additionally support for the relationship between presenteeism and reduced psychological health, namely emotional exhaustion. Prior research has generally focused on the negative outcomes of lost productivity

and further illness, whereas this study suggests that psychological depletion is another possible downside to presenteeism. Additionally, it suggests that feedback awareness is one factor that may increase attendance while unwell. Feedback awareness itself may also contribute to emotional exhaustion, suggesting that such behaviors may have some negative outcomes, as previously mentioned.

The current pandemic has changed the nature of the workplace to an extent. Namely, some organizations have shifted to a partial or fully remote working situation. Future research should examine how this might impact presenteeism. For example, individuals working from home may experience the negative effects of presenteeism to a lesser degree. They do not have to exert as much effort to get ready for the day and commute into the office, which could reduce resources. Additionally, it should take less effort to conceal internal discomfort when not face to face with others. These factors should allow individuals to have more time and other available resources for recuperation. Another factor to examine is whether the likelihood of presenteeism is affected by remote work. Because remote work means others are not present to examine your condition, a person who is inclined to work while ill may feel more emboldened to do so if their ailment is one that others would have noticed in person. Additionally, some workers may feel more comfortable calling in sick if they do not have to regularly see their supervisor to whom they are calling in sick. This may depersonalize the situation and facilitate absenteeism instead of presenteeism.

Feedback awareness might also be affected by remote work. Namely, there may be fewer avenues for observing signals regarding one's place in the organization. For example, instances in which coworkers are rewarded or reprimanded are likely to be harder to observe in a remote setting. This tempers one possible method for feedback awareness. Similarly, it is likely more

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difficult to compare one's behavior to coworkers' behavior when you are not physically present. Instead, if workers are inclined towards feedback awareness, they may instead focus more energy on interpreting emails and calls. They might also shift towards feedback-seeking behaviors instead, since those would potentially be less affected in remote work. Instead of asking for feedback in person, it could instead be done via email, chat, or call, and not be hindered greatly. Due to the increased ambiguity regarding environment fit in remote work, those who have a need for certainty may be likely to increase such behaviors. The relationship between feedback awareness and emotional exhaustion might also be stronger among those in remote work. Since opportunities for feedback awareness are reduced, engaging in such behaviors may take more effort, and thus more resources. It is also possible that individuals who engage in feedback awareness may simply reduce such behaviors when it becomes difficult to do so. However, this might increase uncertainty over one's standing and thus have a negligible differential effect on emotional exhaustion.

Conscientiousness moderated the relationship between feedback awareness and emotional exhaustion, such that the relationship was weaker among those higher in conscientiousness. While this was the opposite of what I hypothesized, it suggests that conscientious may act as a buffer from some of the negative effects of feedback awareness. It is possible that those higher in conscientiousness may have more bandwidth for feedback awareness on top of their regular work, or more capability to employ their feedback without it decreasing their resources, thus helping them avoid as much emotional exhaustion. Future research should further explore this relationship to help validate or refute the moderating effect of conscientiousness.

Future research should examine other possible moderating effects. For example, it is possible that severity or manner of illness might be a moderator. If a person has a more impactful illness, whether physical or psychological, then feedback awareness or its results may not be as salient, and the illness may be a larger barrier to attending work. Similarly, if that person still decides to go to work, then a more severe illness could cause a higher stress and resource loss at work, and thus be more strongly related to emotional exhaustion. For this reason, it may be beneficial to measure both whether presenteeism was engaged in, as was done in this study, as well as how severe was the ailment associated with the act of presenteeism.

One limitation of this study is that due to this data being collected at only one timepoint, causality is not able to be supported. It is possible that the relationships may influence one another in the opposite direction of what was predicted. For example, emotional exhaustion may cause workers to attend work while sick, as they are more likely to be experiencing ongoing illness due to their psychological state (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). This attendance while ill may cause workers manifest more feedback awareness, since they may feel they are not performing as highly, and thus employ such strategies. It is also possible that each relationship is explained instead by an unmeasured variable instead. For example, instead of feedback awareness and presenteeism being positively related, it is possible that some disposition of the individual might explain both. I controlled for personality variables for this reason, but it is possible that one or more other, unmeasured personality traits or contextual variables could be a factor in these relationships. I recommend future research test this model with longitudinal data to further understand causality.

Another limitation is the relatively small sample size. Future research should examine this model with a larger sample, with more statistical power, to better determine whether there is

a direct effect separate from the indirect effect. The mediation model I proposed may or may not

be how these variables are related, but a subsequent study using longitudinal data and a larger

sample would help clarify the nature of these relationships.

Conclusion

Workers attend work while ill despite the possibility of negative outcomes for both

worker and organization. I tested a partial mediation model based on conservation of resources

theory and social learning theory exploring how awareness of cues regarding desirable behaviors

and performance might be related to presenteeism and emotional depletion. The results indicate

that workers who engage in feedback awareness are more likely to expend more resources by

being present for work despite illness, and thus have increased emotional exhaustion.

Additionally, feedback awareness was positively related to emotional exhaustion directly. I also

tested conscientiousness as a moderator and found that high conscientiousness workers had less

emotional exhaustion when engaging in feedback awareness compared to low conscientiousness

workers, which could be due to conscientious being a buffer against resource loss from feedback

awareness.

Future research may clarify the psychological processes involved in these relationships,

as this study did not have enough information to determine why these variables were related. It is

possible that workers use social learning to determine whether to attend work while ill, or some

other mechanism might better explain this relationship. Additionally, loss of resources might

explain why focusing on how a supervisor rewards and discourages behavior is related to

increased psychological depletion, but it is possible that other explanations may be more

accurate. The current study adds to the literature by providing evidence that feedback awareness

might have a negative impact in the form of emotional exhaustion and increased likelihood of attending work while ill.

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Table 1.

Reliabilities, Descriptive Statistics, and Inter-Item Correlations Matrix

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Presenteeism	2.64	1.27	-					
2. EE	2.52	.89	.35**	(.80)				
3. FM	3.14	.84	.25**	.22**	(.73)			
4. CON	6.5	1.47	.04	-.13	.15*	(.80)		
5. Extraversion	5.76	1.00	.06	-.05	.26**	.42**	(.34)	
6. ES	6.14	1.35	-.02	-.14	.02	.54**	.22**	(.68)

Note. $n = 174$. Reliabilities in the diagonal.
EE = Emotional Exhaustion; FM = Feedback Monitoring;
CON = Conscientiousness; ES = Emotional
Stability
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Mediator and Dependent Variable Regressed on Predictors

Predictor	Step 1			Step 2		
	Dependent Variable: Presenteeism			Dependent Variable: Emotional Exhaustion		
	b	SE	t	*b*	SE	t
Feedback Monitoring	.39**	.12	3.33	.18*	.08	2.36
Conscientiousness	.02	.08	.29	-.10	.05	-1.91
FM*Conscientiousness	.06	.07	.81			
Presenteeism				.22**	.05	4.28
Presenteeism*Conscientiousness				.00	.03	.02
FM*Conscientiousness				-0.12*	.05	-2.55
R^2	.26*			.45**		

Note. n = 174. * p < .05. ** p < .01.

Table 3

Mediator and Dependent Variable Regressed on Predictors

Predictor	Step 1			Step 2		
	Dependent Variable: Presenteeism			Dependent Variable: Emotional Exhaustion		
	b	SE	t	*b*	SE	t
Feedback Monitoring	.39**	.12	3.32	.18*	.08	2.31
Conscientiousness	.02	.07	.26	-.11	.05	-2.35
FM*Conscientiousness	.06	.07	.85			
Presenteeism				.23**	.05	4.47
Presenteeism*Conscientiousness				-.01	.03	-.24
FM*Conscientiousness				-.11*	.05	-2.47
R^2	.26*			.45**		

Note. n = 174. * p < .05. ** p < .01.
Excludes emotional stability as a
control variable.
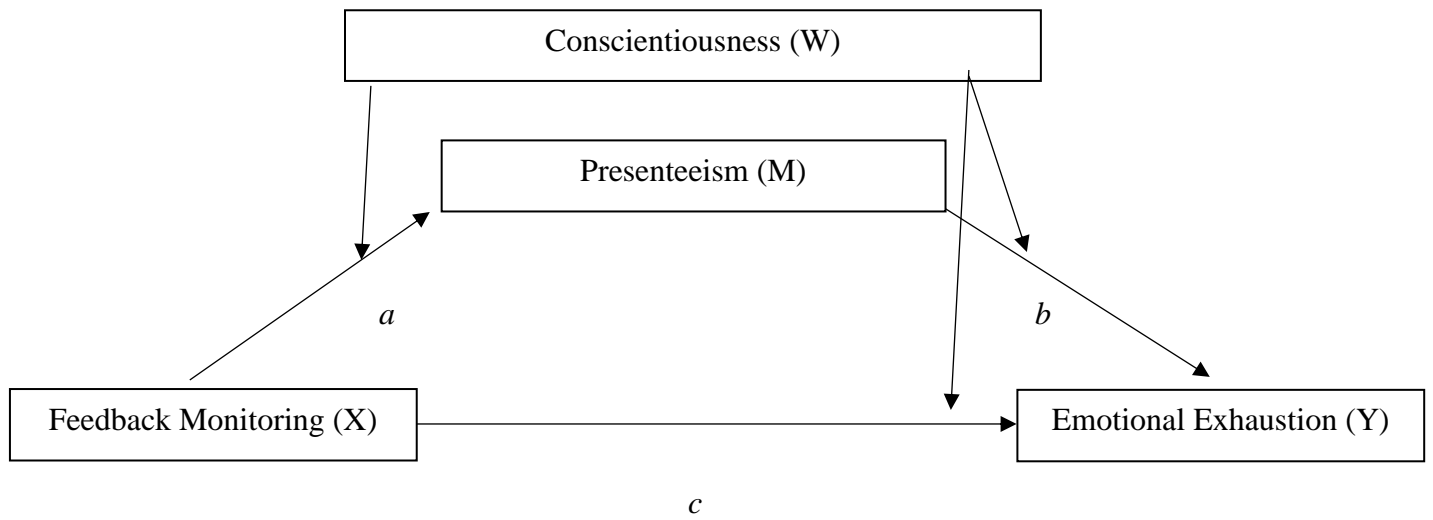
Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model.
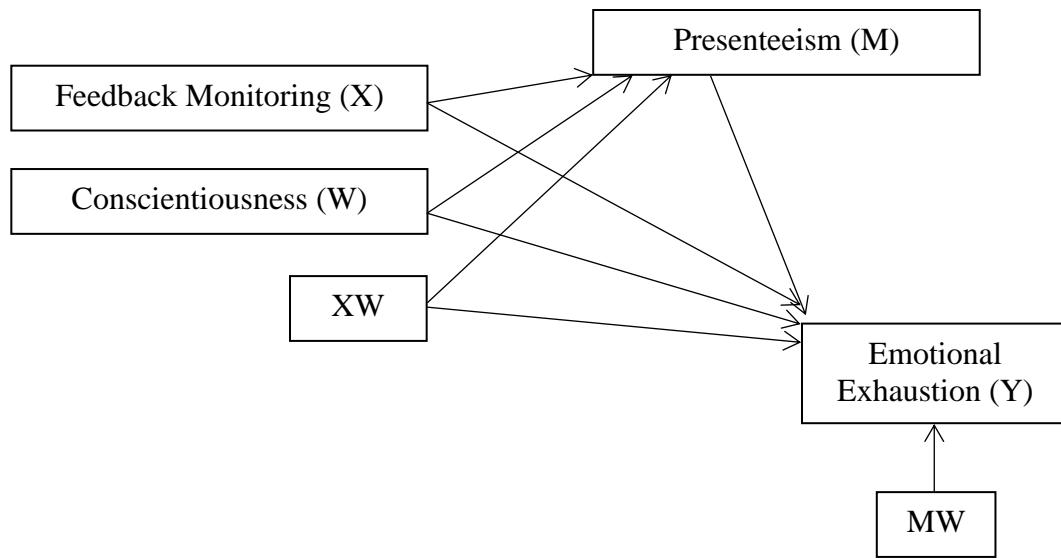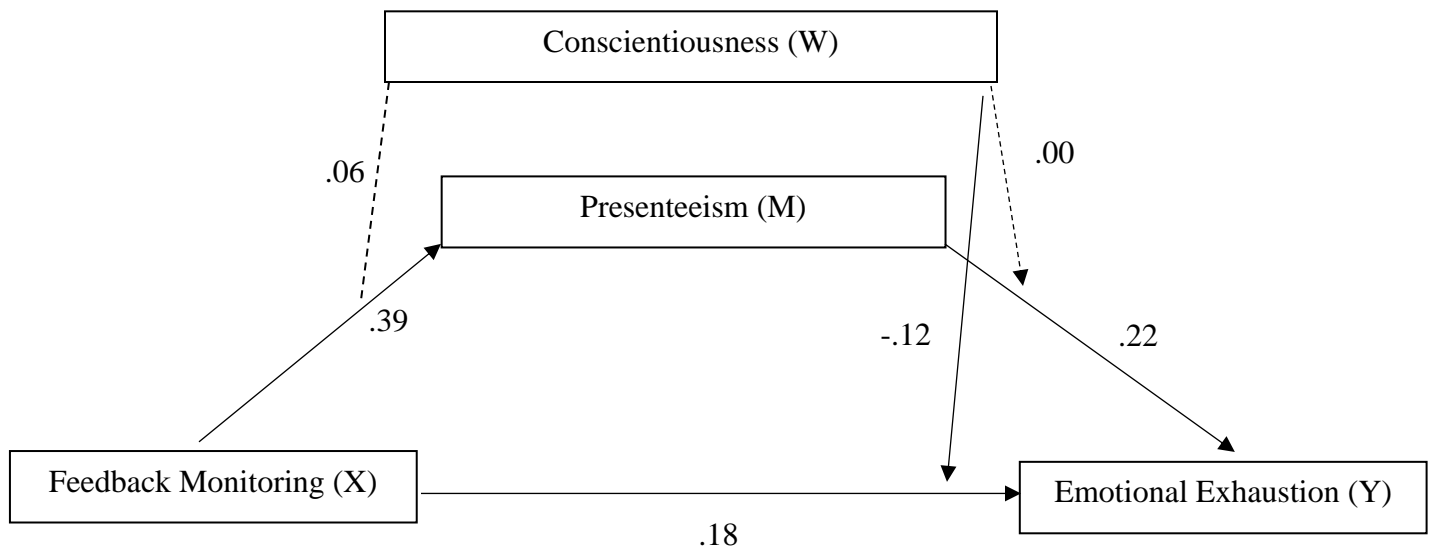
Figure 2. Structural Model.

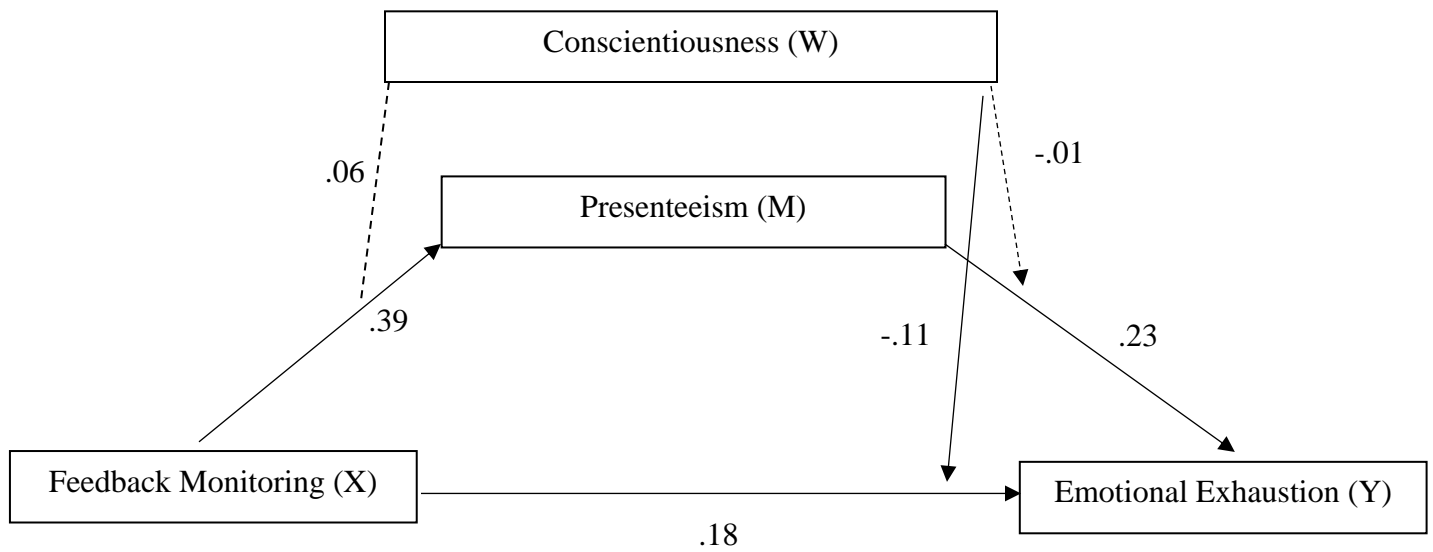*Figure 3.* Results of the model. Solid lines are significant.

Figure 4. Results of the model (excluding emotional stability as a control variable). Solid lines are significant.
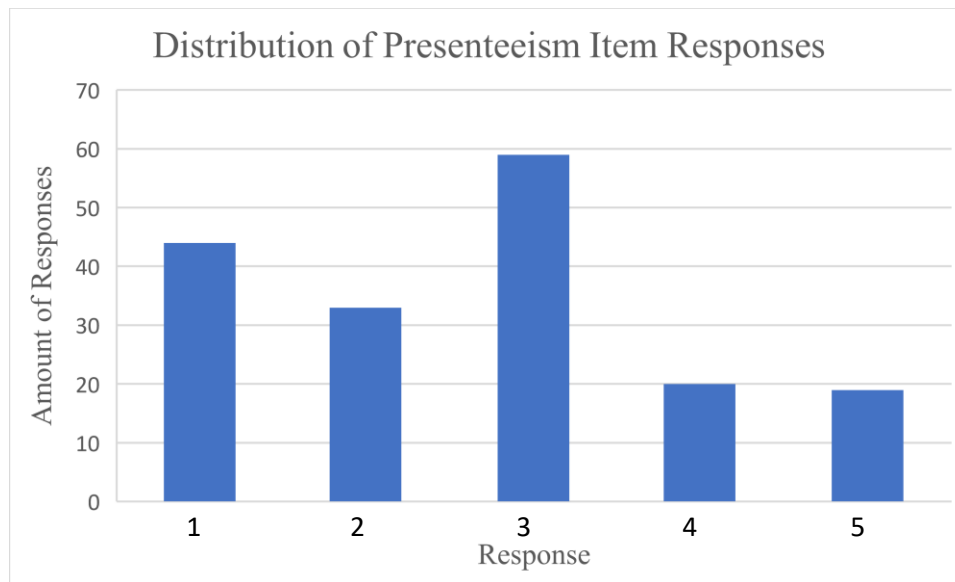
Figure 5. Distribution of responses to the item "How many times during the last 12 months have you gone to work even though it would have been reasonable to take sick leave?" 1 = No, never; 2 = Yes, once; 3 = Yes, 2-5 times; 4 = Yes, 6-8 times; 5 = Yes, more than 8 times.
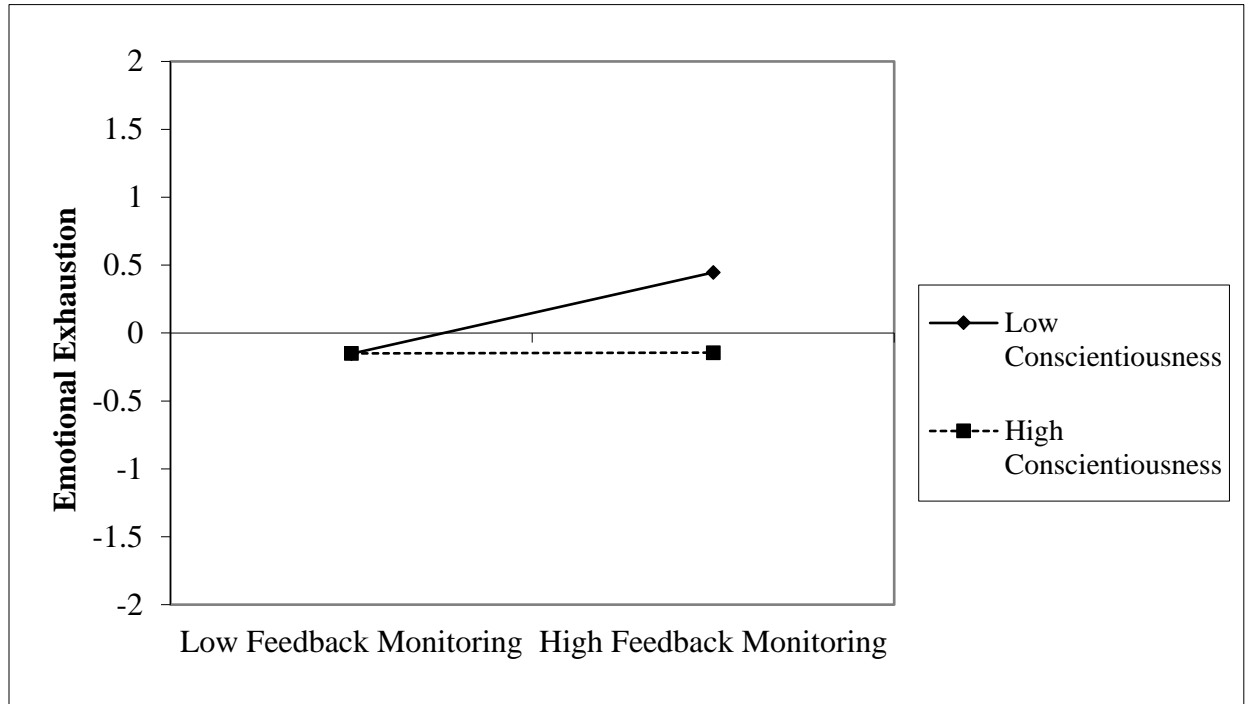
Figure 6. Effect of interaction between conscientiousness and feedback monitoring on emotional exhaustion.